

CHILDREN ARE PART OF FAMILIES. Families are part of communities and family well-being is influenced by social, religious, cultural and economic forces that either support family life or undermine it. Many of the pressures felt by Utah families today were unknown a generation ago. Regardless of personal feelings about the rapid social and economic changes affecting families, most people recognize that parents today need information that supports their efforts to make the best possible decisions about the care and education of their children.

If your workforce includes members of America's Baby Boom generation—born between 1946 and 1964—many of your employees also help manage the care of older relatives, especially their aging parents. While the day-to-day tasks—shopping, helping around the house, running errands—may be the most demanding, the managerial details—hours on the phone arranging or monitoring services provided by home care or nursing agencies—are no small task. In fact, finding care for aging parents is even more complicated than making child care arrangements, particularly if the parents live more than an hour away from their adult children.

One strategy employers use to help employees manage these caregiving responsibilities is to provide information and education about work/life issues and services. For your planning purposes, you may want to consider three information service options:

- Resource and referral services
- Workshops, seminars or support groups
- Work/life resource libraries

As you review the range of information services available in the community, or as you consider developing services, review each option carefully to determine its capacity to offer the following to your employees:

- Assistance in defining and clarifying child, elder or other dependent care needs,
- Detailed information and resources on the availability of services,
- Help in anticipating future needs,
- Support with the search for services, the selection process, and the use of services for children and/or elderly relatives.

What are Resource and Referral Services?

Resource and referral (R&R) services were developed to help people negotiate the child care and elder care system. The availability, cost and quality of child and dependent care services vary widely depending on where families live or work in Utah. Most communities have a critical shortage of care for infants, toddlers and school age children, and rural areas have a severe child care shortage, regardless of children's ages. The quality of care ranges from inadequate to excellent, and the cost of care varies widely, even among program types.

R&R can provide employees with more than names and telephone numbers. It offers detailed information on location, hours, costs, ages served, other program features and current openings. R&R staff do not recommend one service over another; instead they help employees clarify what they need and want from the service and help them locate services that they may not be able to find on their own. R&R can educate your employees about program quality, about the availability of subsidies to help pay the cost of care and can provide other important information on using child and elder care.

In cases where no suitable services exist, staff at the R&R can help an employee consider alternatives and how to cope with the limitations of the child or elder care market. Use of R&R services can also save employees time—R&R services saved employees an average of 17 hours in their child care search, according to a study cited in *Employee Benefit News*.

Utah has a system of child care resource and referral centers funded by the Utah State Office of Child Care. While state funding covers core child care resource and referral services, more comprehensive services are available for employers through enhanced R&R contracts.

According to the *National Report on Work & Family*, more than 70% of companies offering work/life support offer child and dependent care referral services. These services have several advantages:

- They can help employees anticipate the need for services and make better choices.
- They help employees arrange for more stable child or elder care arrangements, which helps reduce absenteeism caused by the breakdown of undependable care.
- The time saved and the reduced stress—combined with R&R's ability to serve a broad spectrum of employees—is often the "bottom line" justification for the popularity of these services with employers.

In addition to contracting for enhanced referral services, your local R&R agency may be able to assist your company with a number of other services: Ask about the creative, cost-effective ways that the R&R can make information available to your employees. In some areas, referral information is available by email or fax, or online at the R&R's website. In other cases, R&R staff will visit the worksite to help employees with child or elder care needs. In addition to the referral data, R&R staff may be able to present workshops on work/life issues, either as part of the enhanced referral service or on a fee-for-service basis. Staff at the R&R may also be a source of technical help in developing new child care services, in convening a collaborative, or in managing a child care tuition assistance program. Whatever your ultimate goal for work/life support within the company, the staff at the R&R can offer valuable advice and assistance.

For many companies, R&R is the first step into work/life support. Data on employee needs that is generated by users of the R&R service can also be used in planning future work/life support programs

To get the name of the resource and referral service that serves your area, visit jobs.utah.gov.

What Other Information Services are Available?

Employers have begun to recognize the value of providing information and educational resources to employees at the work site. Providing workshops or an on-site work/life resource library is an inexpensive strategy for supporting employees' ability to balance family responsibilities with career demands. "Brown bag workshop sessions" offered at lunch time—or before or after work—are a popular option. Topics vary, but most often focus on wellness and work/life themes that interest the employee population. One key advantage is that workshops and a resource library offer an opportunity to address issues for all employees, from single workers to those with aging parents to those approaching retirement themselves.

Implementation of information services can begin with the designation of an employee planning group to work with the Human Resources Department to identify concerns and set priorities. Only a modest investment is required to develop either a workshop series or a resource library, although the quality of the information and presentation should be high to make them worthwhile. Either a workshop series or a resource library can be implemented on a small scale and built up over a long period.

For expert assistance in developing these information services, contact the Office of Work & Family Life, a local child care resource and referral agency, a college or university department related to the relevant topics or other social service agencies.